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THERMAL STIR WELDER

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application is a continuation of application Ser. No. 10/385,168, filed Feb. 28, 2003 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,980,449 (which is hereby incorporated by reference); which is a divisional of application Ser. No. 09/994,506 filed on Nov. 27, 2001 (now abandoned).

ORIGIN OF THE INVENTION

This invention was made by employees of the United States Government and may be manufactured and used by or for the Government for governmental purposes without the payment of any royalties.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a welding method and apparatus, and in particular, to a welding method and apparatus which separately plasticizes or melts the surfaces to be joined followed by a subsequent weld matrix mixing process.

2. Background of the Invention

Welding processes can be classified into one of two categories, fusion welding and solid state welding. Fusion welding involves melting material to be welded and includes such processes as MIG, TIG and VPPA welding. Solid state welding joins materials without a melting step and include the processes of friction stir and inertia welding. Fusion weld processes typically result in a dendritic type weld microstructure exhibiting inferior mechanical and structural properties. Such inferior material properties are generally seen in metals subsequent to melting. Conversely, solid state weld processes result in a non-dendritic grain structure exhibiting properties superior to those produced with fusion welding processes.

Both fusion welding and solid state welding have respective limitations. As indicated above, fusion welding compromises the microstructure of the material and thus lessens the physical properties and characteristics of the material. Solid state welding such as inertia welding is limited to rounded structures such as pipe or rod structures.

A recent advancement was made when friction stir welding became available for the solid state welding of materials. Reference is made, for example, to U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,168,067 B1 to Waldron et al. and 6,053,391 to Heideman et al. With the use of friction stir welding, a solid state weld could, for the first time, be provided in applications requiring longitudinal welds, ranging from several inches to an unlimited length. As described in more detail in the aforementioned patents, the friction stir weld process uses a rotating shoulder/pin configuration. The shoulder produces frictional heat to bring the material into a plasticized state and forges the welded material with extremely large forces. To accomplish the necessary large forces for the forging effect, a very robust backing anvil is required for support. The welding pin spins inside the workpiece at the same rate as the shoulder. The dependent motion of the welding pin and shoulder restricts the speed of the welding process.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the present invention, a welding method and apparatus are provided for forming a weld joint. The method separates the welding process into separate and

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discrete steps, one providing heating of first and second abutting elements to be welded to form an interface therebetween of plasticized or melted material and a further matrix transformation step for processing the interface material after cooling to a plasticized phase. The heating process may use any conventional fusion welding process such as laser or plasma torch which initially melts the interface material. Subsequently, a separate grinding/extrusion element recrystallizes possible, undesirable dendritic matrix structures while the interface material is in the plasticized temperature state. Advantageously, separate heating sources can be used to plasticize or melt the respective first and second elements forming the weld joint independently. The independent melting feature provides for the joining of dissimilar metals such as copper and aluminum or stainless steel and titanium.

According to one aspect of the present invention, a welding method is provided for joining a workpiece comprising first and second elements in abutting relation along facing surfaces. The method includes heating the first and second elements to plasticize or melt the elements at least at the facing surfaces so as to form an interface therebetween of material in a melted state. If the interface material is heated to a melted state, then the interface material is allowed to cool from the melted state to a plasticized state. Next, the interface material is mixed while in the plasticized state.

According to another aspect of the present invention, an apparatus is provided for forming a weld joint in a workpiece between first and second elements in abutting relation along facing surfaces. The apparatus includes a heating device for plasticizing or melting the first and second elements at least at the facing surfaces so as to form interface therebetween of material in a plasticized or melted state respectively. A mixing tool mixes the interface material when in a plasticized state.

Preferably, the apparatus further comprises forming means for exerting force on the elements to control forming thereof. Advantageously, the temperature of the forming means is controlled to provide heating or cooling of the elements.

In one preferred embodiment, the forming means comprises at least one forging plate. Advantageously, the apparatus further comprises control means for sensing the force exerted by the forging plate and for controlling feeding of the first and second elements based thereon. Preferably, the control means controls one of feed rate and travel speed to control feeding of the elements.

In another preferred embodiment, the forming means comprises a plurality of rollers. In this embodiment, the apparatus preferably further comprises control means for controlling the force exerted by the rollers and for controlling feeding of the first and second elements based thereon. Preferably, the control means controls one of feed rate and travel speed to control feeding of said elements.

Preferably, the apparatus further comprises control means for sensing energy input to the heating elements and for controlling one of feed rate or travel speed of the elements based thereon.

In a preferred implementation, the apparatus further comprises a pre-weld tack welding means located upstream of the mixing tool for tack welding the two elements together prior to mixing by the mixing tool.

Advantageously, the mixing tool is retractable so as to enable complete withdrawal thereof from the first and second elements.

Preferably, the apparatus further comprises containment forging plates for containing the first and second elements during mixing by the mixing tool.

According to yet another aspect of the present invention, a joined workpiece has a first element comprising a first metal

material having a first plasticized temperature and a second element comprising a second metal material having a second plasticized temperature different from the first plasticized temperature. A longitudinal weld joint is formed between the first metal element and the second metal element. The weld joint has a recrystallized fine grain matrix.

A key feature of the present invention relates to the separation of a heating process to form a plasticized or melted interface material between two elements to be joined and a mixing process for mixing the interface material together while in a plasticized state. This separation enables each of the respective materials being joined to be heated and plasticized/melted independently. One advantage of this feature is that the invention enables dissimilar metals to be welded together which previously were not able to be joined, i.e., metals such as copper/aluminum, stainless steel/copper, and stainless steel/titanium. For example, a copper/aluminum weld can be achieved by providing independent temperature control as each alloy is brought up to its respective plasticized/melted state. A further advantage of separating the heating process from the weld matrix transformation process is that comparatively high workpiece travel rates during welding can be obtained. In this regard, the present invention is not inherently limited with respect to travel rates as is the case with a friction stir welding process.

An additional important feature of the present invention is that the invention provides matrix transformation of the interface material from dendritic to fine grained material. More specifically, the present invention provides for transforming grain structure from the dendritic-type weld microstructure formed as a result of the heating process to a recrystallized fine, non-dendritic grain structure. As a consequence, the resulting final grain structure is typically that of a solid state weld material and thus exhibits excellent mechanical material properties.

A further advantage of the present invention is that the invention can provide long longitudinal welds of varying material thickness.

Yet another advantage of the present invention is that the invention can be used to form longitudinal welds exhibiting a solid state weld material property without a backing anvil such as is required in stir welding.

Further features and advantages of the present invention will be set forth in, or apparent from, the detailed description of preferred embodiments thereof which follows.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

FIG. 1 is a longitudinal cross sectional view of a welding apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is an end elevational view of the welding apparatus of FIG. 1; and

FIG. 3 is a longitudinal cross sectional view, partially broken away, of a further embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring now to FIG. 1 and FIG. 2, there is shown a welding device, generally denoted 10, which is adapted to join together first and second elements 14 and 16 of a workpiece 12. The welding device 10 includes heating elements 18 and 20.

Heating element 18 provides sufficient heat to plasticize or melt the material of element 14 and may comprise such conventional heating devices as lasers or plasma torches or other suitable devices known in the art. Similarly, heating element

20 provides sufficient heat to plasticize or melt the material of element 16. As a result, together, heating elements 18 and 20 transform a portion of the solid material of the workpiece 12, viz., respective abutting portions of elements 14, 16 to form an interface 34 (see FIG. 2) in a plasticized or melted phase, between the elements 14, 16.

The heating elements 18 and 20 can be controlled individually for providing heating at a desired separate temperature. For example, where elements 14 and 16 comprise dissimilar materials having different melting points, heating element 18, 10 preferably provides heating at the plasticizing or melting temperature of element 14 whereas heating element 20 preferably provides heating at the plasticizing or melting temperature of the material of element 16.

15 The material of element 14 and element 16 may be formed of the same or different metal material. For example, element 14 may be copper or stainless steel, and element 16 may be aluminum, copper or titanium, so that when joined together, elements 14 and 16 form a workpiece 12 formed of copper/ 20 aluminum, or stainless steel/copper or stainless steel/titanium or another combination.

In an alternative embodiment, additional heating elements (not shown) of the type of heating elements 18, 20 may be disposed adjacent to the heating elements 18, 20 and/or below 25 workpiece 12, to assist in plasticizing/melting the abutting portions of the elements 14, 16. An optional tack weld heater 22, disposed upstream, relative to the heaters 18 and 20, provides sufficient heat to form an initial tack weld between the elements 14, 16.

30 As shown in FIG. 2, a pair of clamping elements 36, 38 apply a respective force on the workpiece 12 towards each other. The force applied maintains elements 14 and 16 in proper alignment with each other.

A mixing tool such as toothed grinding/extruding member 35 40 is positioned in the path of the interface 34 between elements 14 and 16 and rotates to mix the material of interface 34 when in a plasticized phase. The grinding/extruding member 40 allows plasticized metal of the interface 34 to flow and extrude through the individual teeth, which are indicated at 40a, of member 40. The teeth 40a are angled, thus forcing the plasticized material to flow downwards or upwards depending upon the angle of the teeth 40a. As a result, the grinding/extruding member 40 will recrystallize the dendritic matrix structure which may have been formed in the material of 45 interface 34 as a result of the melting process. Grinding/extruding member 40 is retractable as indicated by arrow A and can be completely withdrawn from the workpiece formed by elements 14 and 16.

50 A plurality of force actuators 42 are located downstream of grinding member 40 and used to apply a force on a pair of forging plates 44, 46 which are located on opposite sides of workpiece 12. Force actuators 42 include rollers 42a which engage and bear against plates 44, 46. In an alternative embodiment, plates 44, 46 can be eliminated and rollers 42a 55 used to bear directly on the workpiece, i.e., either rollers, or plates, can be used separately to exert the required force to further form the workpiece. Further, the rollers or forging plates can be heated or cooled (e.g., by water cooling) to control the temperature of the workpiece material.

60 As indicated in the drawings, the heating elements described above and the grinding member 40 extend through forging plates 44, 46 so as to permit them to perform their respective functions. The force exerted upon the forging plates 44, 46 by the force actuators 42 is constant for a workpiece having constant thickness, while a variable force is 65 exerted on the forging plates 44, 46 by the actuators 42 to accommodate workpieces of a tapered thickness.

A pair of motion control devices indicated separately at 48 control the amount of movement of the forging plates 44, 46. The motion control devices 48 each may comprise a LVDT, a laser device or other suitable motion control device known in the art.

During the operation of the welding device 10, the workpiece 12 is inserted into an entrance 50 of a housing 52 which houses the various elements and units described above. As set forth hereinbefore, the heating elements 18, 20 provide the desired heating of elements 14 and 16, to form the plasticized or melted phase interface 34.

During the heating process, undesirable dendritic-type weld microstructures may be introduced into the matrix of the interface material 34. Advantageously, the heating process takes place in an inert environment. For example, nitrogen gas can be pumped into housing 52 to provide an inert environment, thereby reducing or eliminating the oxidation of the material of workpiece 12 during the heating process.

The workpiece 12 proceeds through the welding device 10 in a direction denoted by arrow 54. The material of interface 34 is in a plasticized or melted state while in the area generally indicated by reference numeral 56. As the workpiece 12 proceeds along direction 54, if the interface was heated to a melted state, the melted interface is transformed into a plasticized state. The transition point where the melted interface becomes plasticized is denoted by a dashed line 58. The workpiece 12 transitions from the melted state to the plasticized state due to the absence of applied heat. Alternatively, if the material of interface 34 is merely heated to a plasticized state, the interface material remains in a plasticized state as the workpiece proceeds past dashed line 58.

The workpiece 12 then proceeds to the location the grinding/extruding member 40. The interface 34, now in the plasticized state, is processed by the grinding/extruding teeth 40a of member 40 and the plasticized material of interface 34 flows and is extruded through the teeth 40a. As indicated above, this processing of the interface material dramatically recrystallizes the grain structure, thus producing a fine grained weld matrix when fully cooled.

As shown in the drawings, member 40 includes a central mixing portion comprising the grinding/extruding teeth 40a extending along the length thereof and support portions directly connected to the central portion. Considering, for example, the upper support portion, this portion extends through an opening in forging plate 44 which terminates at a major surface at plate 44, as illustrated.

The workpiece 12 next travels past the grinding/extruding member 40 to a location where the hot interface material, which is still in a plasticized state, is forged under pressure by 50 the forging plates 44, 46.

In an advantageous embodiment, a controller or control system 60 is employed which controls the feed rate or travel speed of the workpiece formed by elements 14 and 16 by controlling the force exerted by either the forging plates 44, 46 and/or rollers 42a (whether used separately or in combination, as indicated schematically by the dashed lines in FIG. 1). Although a separate controller 60 is shown, the control system could directly control force actuators 42.

Alternatively, or in addition, a control system or controller 62 is also provided which controls the material feed rate or travel speed by monitoring or sensing the energy input to the heating elements 18 and 20, or as illustrated, the energy input to a further heating element 64. The overall control system could also include a sensor 66 for sensing feed rate or travel speed and supplying a corresponding input signal to controller 62.

Referring to FIG. 3, in accordance with a further important feature of the invention, separate containment forging plates 68 and 70 are provided closely adjacent to or, in one embodiment, in surrounding relation to, the mixing tool 40 so as to 5 contain the heated material of elements 14, 16 during rotation of the grinding teeth 40a of mixing tool 40.

It should be apparent to those of ordinary skill that the present device and process offers important advantages over previous welding methods. These advantages include the 10 ability to weld together dissimilar alloys which previously could not be joined due to differences in their respective melted and plasticized phase temperatures. Further, the separation of the plasticizing/melting process and interface matrix transformation process results in significantly enhanced 15 welding speeds.

Although the invention has been described above in relation to preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that variations and modifications can be effected in these preferred embodiments without 20 departing from the scope and spirit of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus for forming a weld joint between laterally opposed facing edge surfaces of first and second longitudinal elements, said apparatus comprising:

a support assembly which supports the first and second longitudinal elements as the first and second longitudinal elements are moved longitudinally relative to said support assembly and which holds the laterally opposed facing edge surfaces of the first and second longitudinal elements in abutting relation;

a heating device which heats at least the laterally opposed facing edge surfaces to a plasticizing temperature as the first and second longitudinal elements are longitudinally moved past said heating device and relative to said support assembly;

an elongate mixing tool which is mounted downstream of said heating device, which extends into the plasticized facing edge surfaces of the first and second longitudinal elements, and which mixes the plasticized facing edge surfaces thereof as the first and second longitudinal elements are moved past said mixing tool and relative to said support assembly, whereby a longitudinal weld joint is formed between said facing edge surfaces downstream from said mixing tool; and

wherein said support assembly includes first and second containment forging plates respectively positioned on first and second sides of the first and second longitudinal elements so that the first and second longitudinal elements are longitudinally moved between and relative to said forging plates, said containment forging plates a) containing the moving first and second longitudinal elements during mixing by said mixing tool, and b) effecting forging of the moving first and second longitudinal elements downstream of said mixing tool wherein each of said forging plates includes a surface thereof in engagement with a force actuator on respective sides of said first and second longitudinal elements so that the force actuators apply forces to said forging plates to effect forging.

2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said heating device comprises first and second separate heat sources.

3. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said mixing tool comprises a grinding and extruding device.

4. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said heating device applies heat to a first facing edge surface of the first element at a first element welding temperature, and applies heat to a

second facing edge surface of the second element at a second element welding temperature different than the first welding temperature.

5. The apparatus of claim 4, wherein said heating device comprises a first heat source which applies heat to the first element, and a second heat source separate from said first heat source which applies heat to the second element.

6. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein a temperature of each of said forging plates is controlled to provide heating or cooling of the longitudinal elements.

7. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a control device which senses the force exerted by at least one of said forging plates and which controls feeding of the first and second longitudinal elements based thereon.

8. The apparatus of claim 7, wherein said control device controls one of feed rate and travel speed to control feeding of the first and second longitudinal elements.

9. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said force actuators include a plurality of rollers.

10. The apparatus of claim 9, further including a control device which controls a force exerted by said rollers and which controls feeding of the first and second longitudinal elements based thereon.

11. The apparatus of claim 10, wherein said control device controls one of feed rate and travel speed to control feeding of the first and second longitudinal elements.

12. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a control device which senses an energy input to said heating device and which controls one of a feed rate or a travel speed of the first and second longitudinal elements based thereon.

13. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a pre-weld tack welder located upstream of said heating device which tack welds the first and second longitudinal elements together prior to plasticizing by said heating device and mixing by said mixing tool.

14. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said mixing tool is retractable so as to enable complete withdrawal thereof from between the first and second longitudinal elements.

15. An apparatus for forming a weld joint between laterally opposed first and second facing edge surfaces of respective first and second longitudinal elements made of dissimilar materials, said apparatus comprising:

a support assembly which supports the first and second longitudinal elements as the first and second longitudinal elements are moved longitudinally relative to said support assembly and which holds the laterally opposed

first and second facing edge surfaces of the first and second longitudinal elements in abutting relation; a first heat source which heats the first facing edge surface of the first longitudinal element to a plasticizing temperature of the material of the first longitudinal element as the first and second longitudinal elements are longitudinally moved past said first heating device,

a second heat source separate from said first heat source which heats the second facing edge surface of the second longitudinal element to a plasticizing temperature of the material of the second longitudinal element as the first and second longitudinal elements are longitudinally moved past said second heating device;

an elongate mixing tool which is mounted downstream of said heating device, which extends into the plasticized first and second facing edge surfaces of the first and second longitudinal elements, and which mixes the plasticized first and second facing edge surfaces thereat as the first and second longitudinal elements are moved past said mixing tool, whereby a longitudinal weld joint of the dissimilar materials is formed between said first and second facing edge surfaces downstream from said mixing tool;

wherein said support assembly includes first and second containment forging plates respectively positioned on first and second sides of the first and second longitudinal elements so that the first and second longitudinal elements are longitudinally moved between and relative to said forging plates, said containment forging plates a) containing the moving first and second longitudinal elements during mixing by said mixing tool, and b) effecting forging of the moving first and second longitudinal elements downstream of said mixing tool wherein each of said forging plates includes a surface thereof in engagement with a force actuator on respective sides of said first and second longitudinal elements so that the force actuators apply forces to said forging plates to effect forging.

16. The apparatus of claim 15, wherein a temperature of each of said first and second containment forging plates is controlled to provide heating or cooling of the longitudinal elements.

17. The apparatus of claim 15, further comprising a control device which senses a force exerted by at least one of said forging plates and which controls feeding of the first and second longitudinal elements based thereon.